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ABSTRACT

Although it is usually assumed that the people own the schools and that their will is manifested by boards of school trustees, there is evidence that the "quasi-owners" (not real owners but those who set policy) are educational administrators. If this is so, the reduction of the length of administrative job tenure may be a result of public attempts to curtail administrator quasi-ownership. It also seems logical that if administrators are quasi-owners of the schools, they ought to upgrade their credentials in such areas as policy analysis, philosophy, economics, and political science. To some extent, this is now happening. It also follows that quasi-ownership by school administrators may distort the trustee role into one of quasi-membership. The trustee must struggle to restore the healthy dialectic of tension and redress the imbalance between interest sectors. (Author/JM)

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Quasi-Ownership and the Changing Relationship Between Superintendents and Boards

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Any living organization must contain three interest groups linked in dialectical tension with each other about the product of the enterprise. Thus, a conventional business firm has an ownership (shareholders), organization members (employees of the shareholders), and clientele (customers of both shareholders and employees). The groups are logically distinct and the interests are distinct and what holds the whole together in a dynamic complex is the *product* (soap, services, sentiment).

In education this triangle is constituted by an ownership (the subject of this paper), organization members (teachers, support staff, administrators), and clientele (students and parents of a given school district territory). The product is something called "education" and, very fortunately, time constraints will not permit *any* discussion of that item. Instead, let me direct your attention solely to the element of ownership and the relation between two points of the triangle of forces: - ownership and membership.

My thesis is that the logic of this relationship is confused, that we need to sort it out, get it straight. Indeed, if one has any philosopical passions at all, this whole conceptual area is a veritable minefield of confusions, fallacies, alluring assumptions, ambiguities, quiggles, quirks, cul-de-sacs, and deep-seated dilemmas most of which either go without saying (literally) or are consciously avoided in the heat of action and debate. Therefore it is fascinating. And important!

Now to the problem itself. Who owns what in public education, and how? Who is the owner and who the ownee? Well, let's begin with the classical answer that we've all be taught and which go to the very depths of our being since they are canons of Anglo-Saxon democracy so sacred that they pass unchallenged and simply enter without examination into all of our fund of assumptions.

The classical answer is, of course, that the people own the schools. But what people? The masses? No, we are told. The representatives of the people, duly elected, etc., etc., *vox populi* and all that. In other words, Boards of School Trustees. So! This is where our trouble begins.

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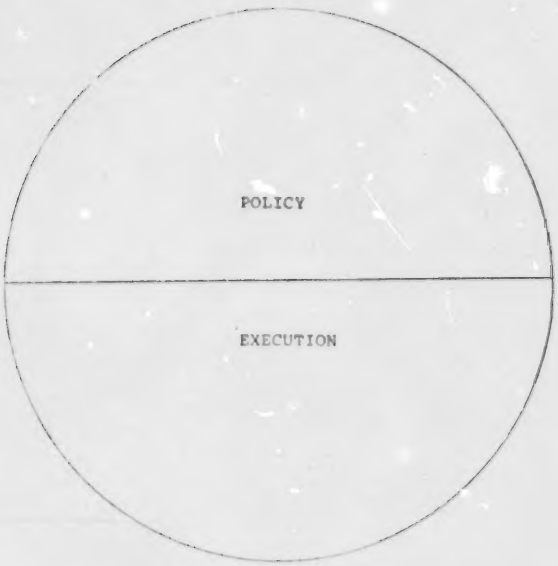
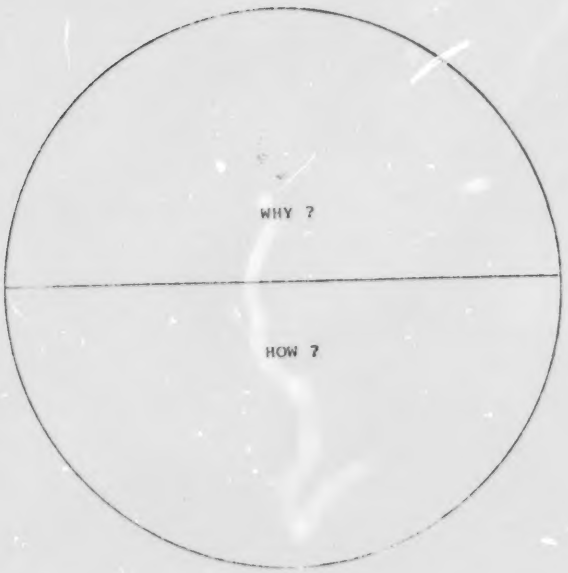
FIG. I



For the first and inalienable right of ownership of an enterprise is to determine policy for that enterprise. And classical theory has neatly divided the logical set of administrative processes into two halves: policy and execution. This has further implications because this division of powers is classically interpreted so that the upper segment address questionsof value, principle, philosophy and the lower matters of fact, constraints, technology and so on. Thinking at the top, doing

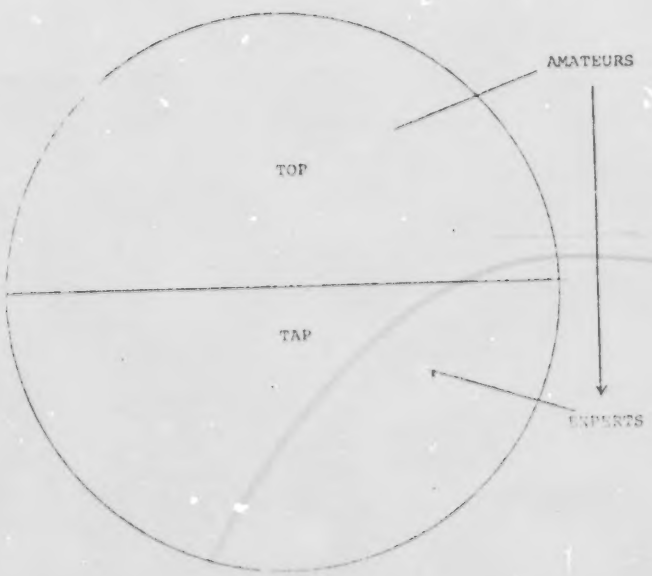
.../3

FIG. 2



on the bottom. And this leads in turn to the most cherished Anglo-Saxon principle of all: that the expert, the one with the know-how, should be on

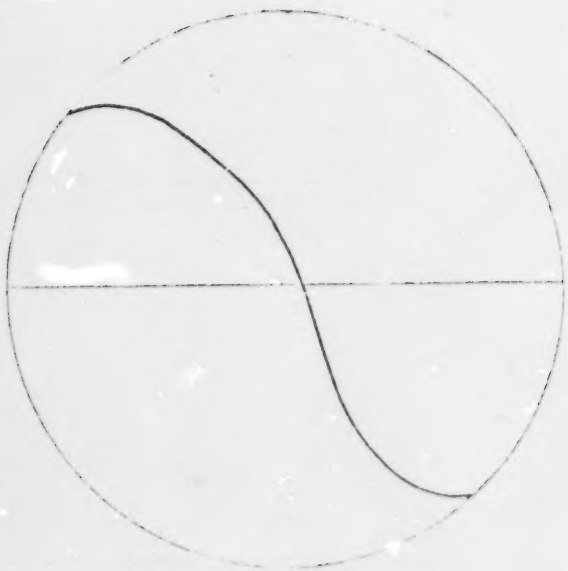
FIG. 3



tap not on top.

So much for classical theory, describing no doubt an ideal order but, in fact, as we well know, the order is rather different. The empirical truth might be depicted more like this:

FIG. 4



with both domains, of owner and ownee, intertwined, interacting, intruding upon each other. Indeed, it might even be much worse. Given the complexity of modern educational organizations and the control of communications and information by technical experts and administrators the truth might not be too far from this:

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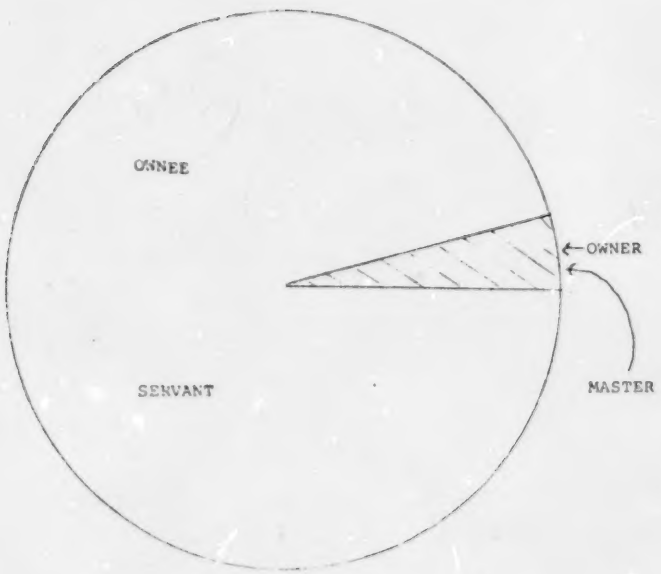
FIG. 5



Notice, however, a subtle shift which has occurred in our analysis. We must be careful not to confuse qualitative with quantitative divisions when looking at these diagrams. Essentially they refer to *qualitative* states of affairs but in the last circle I am suggesting that both aspects (qualitative and quantitative) can be better depicted in the conditions of modern reality as in the figure. It is suggested that owners (trustees) do not, in fact, have that classical investment in ownership which they were once supposed to have had and that, rather, a shift has occurred which, again in fact, puts organization *members* in a position of quasi-ownership.

The point I am driving at in all this, by way of admittedly over-simplistic and deceptive diagrams, is that a subtle change has occurred, which is nevertheless real for all its subtlety, in the concept of ownership. The *real* owners of an educational institution may be those *members* of the organization with *tenure*. In other words those who have

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placed themselves within the flowof a stream of public funding and have acquired rights to appropriate part of that funding. (Evidence to support this reality is not hard to find.) And of these quasi-owners, or pseudo-owners if your wish, the most prominent, salient, and active are those who operate at the interface with the supposedly true (but actually fictional) owners of the system. That is to say, the administrators. That is to say, some of the distinguished members of this audience.

I think there is a problem of political philosophy here, a problem of social science, a problem of organizational theory, a practical problem, and a number of implications. For the purpose of this conference, and given the constraints of time, let me just fasten on three:

(1) Quasi-ownership and the reduction of administrative tenure (by rotation or by term constractual arrangement) may be a manifestation of emergent public consciousness of the underlying problem and, hence, an attempt to convert "owning" to "renting", even if with handsome long-term leases. (7 years for superintendents according to latest studies.)

(2) Quasi-ownership can be interpreted as implying greater responsibilities, duties, and ethical obligations as well asgreater rights and privileges. It is, therefore, within the logic of this analysis that administrators might be persuaded to upgrade their credentials in such areas of study as policy analysis, organizational analysis, philosophy, economics, political science, and graduate work generally (not simply workshops, conferences, and in-service professional development). And to some extent this is certainly already happening as I can show you in this last diagram which refers to the British Columbia context only but which, I am sure, has its analogues throughout Canada and the U.S.

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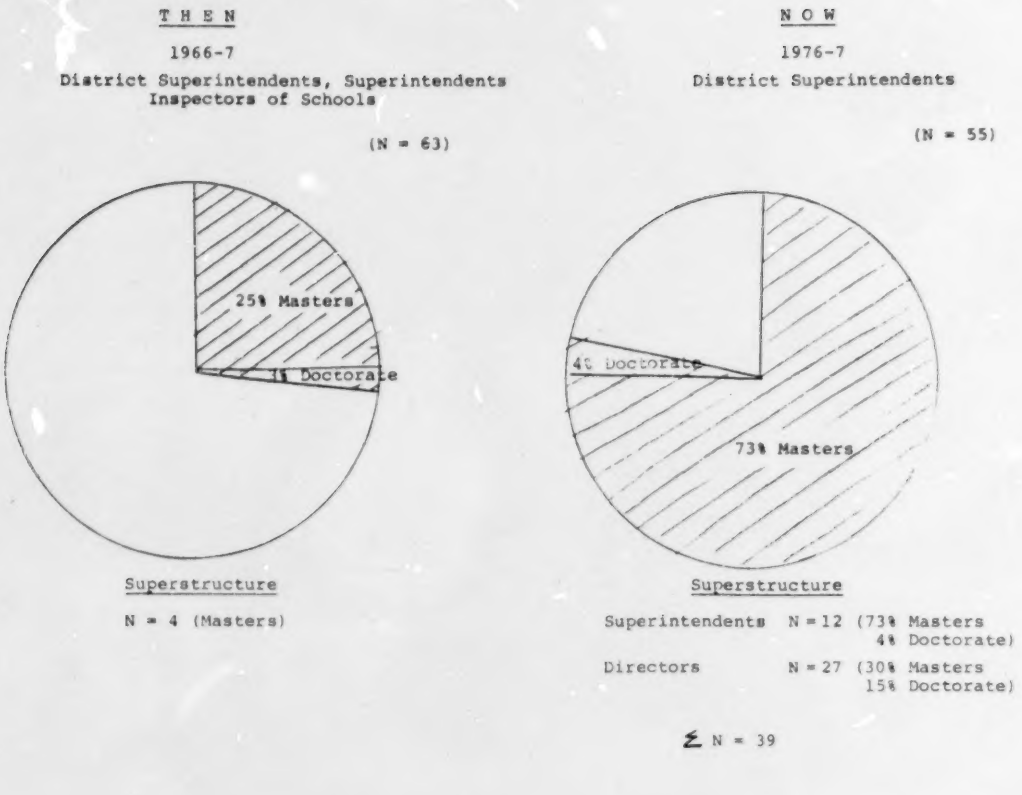
FIG. 6



This, at least, is data-based and quantitative though I leave it to you to draw whatever qualitative inferences you will.

(3) Quasi-ownership may mean a subtle distortion of the trustee role into quasi-*membership*. A loss of power in combination with cooptation into the organization could mean that a trustee may be seduced into playing a kind of organizational partisanship role to the possible detriment of the clientele, especially when the product of the enterprise is, as it *is* in education, ill-defined and unclear. It follows that quasi-ownership places greater philosophical demands on the trustee, he must struggle to restore the healthy dialectic of tension and redress the imbalance between interest sectors. Such a task will be far from easy.

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I have tried to show just a little of the philosophical perplexity underlying this conference. Perhaps confusion is now worse confounded. Nevertheless, as a statement of faith, leadership ultimately must be founded on truth and we cannot escape the obligation to seek that wherever it, in turn, might lead us. Our society is changing and it is changing deep down; it is better to be painfully conscious of that change than blissfully unconscious. And maybe that means, better a discontent superintendent than a happy trustee. Or conversely!